

(Breakthrough, Fall 1987)

DEATH & TRANSFORMATION

by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, M.D.

(Discussion from the Fifth Annual Professional Seminar)

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross began by relating early experiences in her life that were very formative and had much to do with goals she has set and the vigor she has applied toward fulfilling them. One of a set of triplets in a financially comfortable and traditional Swiss family, her physical wants were taken care of, yet she had to deal with a lack of privacy and a search for personal identity. As a teenager, filling in for her ill sister on a date (without telling her sister's boyfriend), she went unrecognized as Elisabeth. This precipitated a personal identity crisis so great that she left home.

There were many lessons available for a teenager hitchhiking the roads of post-war Europe in 1945. One experience that stood out took place in front of the concentration camp at Maidanek. Looking at train cars filled with the shoes of murdered children, she could not understand how people could murder innocent children and then go home and take loving care of their own children.

She talked with a young Jewish girl standing near, who told her, "You're capable of doing this, too." Her first reaction was, "Of course not!" But she then remembered the American Indian admonition about not judging one's neighbor until you had walked a mile in his moccasins, and thought, "Maybe I could have." She decided to learn why some people grow up to be Hitler and some grow up to be Mother Theresa. She wanted to know how to best rear the next generation.

She followed her natural instinct to help people (aroused by the pain and suffering she had seen) by going home to study medicine. But she also wanted to help people recognize and deal with the negativity in their lives, including the Hitler inside them.

After marrying and moving to America, she began to work successfully with so-called hopeless cases—schizophrenics, multiple-handicapped, and the terminally ill. Because of her childhood, she could relate to the "hopeless" cases—they had little identity with most of the medical staff. In talking with them, she learned that those people are the most honest with their feelings, and the most sensitive to the feelings of others. She said she has learned a lot about living from the dying.

Elisabeth said to deal with negativity, anytime you react in a negative way to anything, you should look at it, and work with it—it indicates unfinished business in your life. She said there

are five basic human emotions, all with positive and negative aspects. As one experiences these emotions, one should learn to recognize any negative aspects and deal with them as unfinished business. Fear is natural and serves to protect us, but beyond fears related to protection, there are unnatural fears often related to self-image. Grief is natural and has a cathartic effect, but on the negative side of grief are guilt, self-pity, and shame. Anger is natural, but Elisabeth contended that any anger that lasts longer than 15 seconds implies leftover or suppressed anger from something else. And suppressed anger can turn into rage, hate, and revenge. The fourth natural emotion is jealousy. It causes us to improve ourselves by using others as a yardstick. But repressed jealousy can turn into envy and unhealthy competition. Love is the other natural emotion, and real love is both unconditional and can say "No" to a loved one. Elisabeth said most of us learn to play the "I love you, if..." game. That leads to prostituting oneself for love and approval.

Elisabeth said we must all learn how to deal with our own negativity because the future holds much in store that will test us. The way we deal with AIDS patients indicates many of us have a lot of work to do in overcoming our fears and negativity. She offered this perspective on the AIDS crises: that it offers us, the actual and potential care-givers, an opportunity to observe and improve the way we deal with people who suffer from disease. She re-emphasized our need to grow and nurture the positive, because the times ahead will "separate the wheat from the chaff."

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